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# The idea about Imperialism in Japanese animation films

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of war in Japanese animation films and its impact on society. This study advances the understanding of the portrayal of war in Japanese animation films as well as the role of animation films in depicting important historical events. The films selected are Barefoot Gen (Hadashi no Gen, 1983), Barefoot Gen 2 (Hadashi no Gen 2, 1986), Grave of the Fireflies (Hotaru no Haka, 1988), Girl in Summer Dresses (Natsufuku no Shoujo-tachi, 1988), and Kayoko's Diary – Who's Left Behind (Ushiro no Shomen Daare, 1991). The examination of these films reveals the socio-political implications of war pertaining to the Japanese involvement in World War II. The findings show that the war atrocities perpetrated by the Imperial Japan are condemned by the strong portrayal of devastation and deprivation faced by innocent civilians on the home front. The article concludes that in addition to being a form of art, animation films also act as a social commentary and a medium to provoke positive social change in the society at large.

Keywords: ***Imperialism, Japanese animation film, anime and media***

## INTRODUCTION

Japanese animation (or anime) is one of the most explosive forms of visual culture to emerge at the crossroads of transnational cultural production in recent years. A number of anime are rife with atomic bomb references, which appear in any number of forms, from the symbolic to the literal. The devastating after-effects of the 1945 atomic bombings of Japan such as orphaned kids, radiation sickness, loss of national independence, and destruction of nature continue to give rise to a unique form of animated films. Directors and artists such as Osamu Tezuka and Hayao Miyazaki who witnessed the devastation first-hand were the pioneers of this movement. Yet to this day—74 years after the bombs—these themes continue to be explored by their successors in their efforts of teaching and promoting peace.

In spite of the huge number of war films produced worldwide, there has been limited research on Japanese war films, especially animation films. This article aims to fill the gap by understanding the specific themes that emerge from animation films that were reviewed using the theory / concept of imperialism.

War journalism is oriented to war/violence, propaganda, elites and victory. In addition, war journalism plays up conflict as an arena where participants are grouped starkly into two opposing sides (“them vs. us”) in a zero-sum game and focuses on the visible effects of war (casualties and damage to property). In contrast, peace journalism is a broader, fairer and more accurate way of framing stories, drawing on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation. Like public journalism and development journalism, peace journalism is grounded in communication philosophy, namely the commitment to the idea of civic participation, the understanding of social justice as a moral imperative, and the view that the value and sacredness of the individual are realised only in and through communities. By taking a supportive, interpretative approach, the peace journalist concentrates on stories that highlight peace initiatives, tones down ethnic and religious differences, prevents further conflict, focuses on the structure of society, promotes conflict resolution, reconstruction, and reconciliation by giving voice to all parties (not only two opposing sides), and creates empathy and understanding (Nicole, 2009).

## JAPANESE MEDIA CULTURE

The term “media culture” has become a very relevant concept in media and communication studies over the last decade, whereas before media and culture had been viewed as separate concepts. As a historical phenomenon, media culture is relatively recent. It was not until the advent of television in the post-World War II period that media culture became a dominant force within culture, socialisation, politics, and social life (Kellner, 1995). In Japan, media culture is a commercial form of culture which is produced for profit and disseminated in the form of commodities.

Starting in the 1990s, the development of media globalisation and the strengthened economic power of Asian countries have led to the intensification of media and cultural flows in Asian markets, dramatically increasing the circulation of Japanese media culture. Kellner (1995) argued that media culture is now the dominant form of culture which socialises human beings. Radio, television, film and printed media products provide materials from which many people construct their sense of class, ethnicity and race, nationality, sexuality as well as “us” and “them”. “Media culture,” he writes, “is industrial culture, organised on the model of mass production and is produced for a mass

audience according to types (genres), following conventional formulas, codes, and rules” (Kellner, 1995, p.1). Further, media culture displays reveal those who have power and are allowed to exercise force and violence, and those who do not. In contemporary media culture, the dominant media of information and entertainment are a profound cultural pedagogy as they educate us how to think and behave, how we see ourselves and other people, and how to construct identities. Consequently, critical media literacy can enhance individual sovereignty vis-à-vis media culture, giving them more power over their cultural environment.

Japanese cultural industries enter international markets through three processes; globalisation, regionalisation, and localisation (Iwabuchi, 2000). Scholars such as Furuki and Higuchi have often compared the impact of transnational satellite broadcasting in Japan to the mid-nineteenth century arrival of American Commodore Perry with his fleet of “black ships” which forced Japan to open up to the outside world after two centuries of seclusion (as cited in Iwabuchi, 2000). Japan can no longer enjoy a self-contained domestic market, and instead, can now advance into the global market. Surprisingly, the influx of foreign media products into Japan did not pose a real threat to the Japanese national identity, as the Japanese TV market shifted to a high level of self-sufficiency in the 1970s (Iwabuchi, 2000). As one of the world’s leading producers of film and television animation, there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for Japanese programmes from the 1970s throughout the 1990s. According to Kawatake, the total export hours of Japanese TV programmes has increased from 2,200 in 1971 to 4,585 in 1980 and 19,546 in 1992 (as cited in Iwabuchi, 2000). Besides that, many parts of East and Southeast Asia display a fervid consumption of Japanese TV dramas and idols. In 1997, for the very first time, the Japanese Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication established a committee to report on the promotion of commercial exports of Japanese TV programmes (Iwabuchi, 2002). The significant potential of Japanese TV exports to global markets has thus come to be widely recognized both within and outside Japan starting in the 1990s.

The significance of Japanese media culture is more than just economic. It is increasingly related to Japan’s culture and its national image. The worldwide dissemination of Japanese media culture marks a new form of cultural imperialism or invisible colonisation, sometimes referred to as Japan’s “soft power”. This recent cultural resurgence was highlighted by then Prime Minister, Taro Aso and the Japanese Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, Tamotsu Aoki (Aoki, 2004). Within the Japanese entertainment media culture, anime and manga are referred to as exemplar products. The global success of anime such as *Pokemon*, which “projects a soft and friendly image” and appeals to children all over the world, is “immediately recognised and widely admired” everywhere (Nye, 2004, p.3–4). Meanwhile, manga has penetrated into nearly every facet of Japanese life and culture today and is consumed in different private and public settings, making its way into capturing the global reader’s heart. Additionally, the global computer games industry is also dominated by three Japanese manufacturers: Nintendo, Sega and Sony as evidenced by the popularity of Super Mario Brothers and Sonic.

It is safe to assume that with the expansion of Japanese media culture into global media markets, be it through TV programmes, animations, music or computer games, these products are now recognised as the new icons of Japanese global economy. Japan has become a key player in the audio-visual global market, although as a relatively latecomer in contrast to western countries. As relations with East and Southeast Asian nations improved thus creating a new and favourable climate for cultural exports, Japan is once again seen as the dominant power in Asia. However, the strong demand in the

regions mentioned above for Japanese culture is now believed to play a diplomatic role in healing the wounds of Japan's imperialistic past.

## MEDIA INFLUENCE

Mass media is a potent tool used to influence audience in many ways. The actual force exerted by a media message can result in either a change or reinforcement in the audience's social, cultural and psychological worldview. Thus, social scientists continue to work towards integrating the study of mass media as an instrument of social control.

During war, some governments implemented propaganda campaigns through mass media to unite their people. Toby Clark in his book, *Art and Propaganda* observed that "wartime propaganda attempts to make people adjust to abnormal conditions, and adapt their priorities and moral standards to accommodate the needs of war" (1997, p.103). He further noted that war recruitment posters are often designed to look like advertisements or movie posters to propagate the official messages of the war effort. Indeed, they were an effective political tool in times of war because their messages were directed in a straightforward and persuasive manner. Conventional visual codes in the society such as advertisements, films, animated cartoons, and comics all carried messages that supported the war effort.

During World War II, Japanese propaganda through various forms of media was developed for several reasons: to persuade occupied countries of the benefits of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, to undermine the U.S. troops' morale, to counteract claims of Japanese atrocities, and to present the war to the Japanese people as victorious. The defining element of Japanese propaganda was imperialism. All facets of the propaganda were propagated through films, magazines and newspapers, radio, books, cartoons and the education system. It was noted that the most effective form of propaganda used by the Japanese government was film. According to Baskett (2008), by 1945, propaganda film production under the Japanese had expanded throughout the bulk of their empire including Manchuria, Shanghai, Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. During that period, film proved to be one of the most influential forms of media across the empire.

Cartoons were another form of media that existed during the war. In the early 1940s, the Japanese Navy felt that theatrical cartoon was an ideal propaganda medium to instil patriotic spirit in children. *Momotaro Umi no Shimpei* (*Momotaro's Divine Soldiers of the Sea*) was the notorious war cartoon billed as Japan's first feature-length anime. The story is based on the Japanese folk tale of the mythic boy-hero Momotaro, the Peach Boy (Baskett, 2008). It evoked the fascinating complexity of Japan, a nation that was then enlisting kids in militarist nationalism, yet also delighting in a mixture of popular culture of the everyday life of pre-war Japanese children. The animals in the folk tale are depicted as ferocious fighters who support Momotaro. However, in this film, the animals are depicted as cute cartoons that are often clumsy and silly. This cuteness appeals to the Japanese younger generation and makes them more interested in the war cause. The nationalism and imperialism spirit was then effectively ingrained in them.

Over the last few decades, mass media's influence evolved gradually together with the technology that carried mass-mediated messages. The examples given from past wars all suggest considerable media influence among populations in conflict. It is clear that media is a significant force in the world. Media creates a mediated culture in which it reflects and creates the culture. Communities and individuals are bombarded

constantly with messages from a multitude of media sources, and their thinking and daily behaviour are influenced. As wars and conflicts continued to take place, mass media, in particular popular culture, became a crucial means to disseminate political messages.

## THE SELECTION AND STUDY CRITERIA OF JAPANESE WAR ANIMATION FILMS

The animation films studied in this article revolve around the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945—the only active deployments of nuclear weapons in the entire history of the human race—alongside the firebombing of Tokyo a few months earlier. Then the list was narrowed again by selecting animation films produced in the 1980s – 1990s.

The animation films selected were: *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*, 1983), *Barefoot Gen 2* (*Hadashi no Gen 2*, 1986), *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*, 1988), *Girl in Summer Dresses* (*Natsufuku no Shoujo-tachi*, 1988), and *Kayoko's Diary – Who's Left Behind* (*Ushiro no Shomen Daare*, 1991).

## CONCEPT OF IMPERIALISM

Over the years, the term “imperialism”, like “empire” and “colonialism”, has come to mean different things. It was only in the 1870s that the term was associated with nations in which Britain claimed sovereignty (Cain & Harrison, 2001). From 1890 onwards, the term was used more frequently in its modern form and both critics and supporters of the phenomenon became increasingly convinced that “economic imperialism” or “capitalist imperialism” was a central matter for concern and investigation (ibid, p. 2). Indeed, the economic basis of imperialism has caused conflict among the great powers at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, over the partition of Africa (1884), the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Spanish-American War (1898), the South African (Boer) War (1899–1902), and the Russo-Japanese War (1905). A new imperialism has since emerged and is associated with monopoly capitalism that is qualitatively different from the colonialism that preceded it. The intensification of colonial rivalry also ended the relatively peaceful condition of the mid-19th century.

Hobson (1920) alluded the role of patriotism, philanthropy, and the spirit of adventure in advancing the imperialist cause. He argued that capitalist societies produce an excess of goods and capital because they underpay their workers. According to Hobson, imperialism is not in the economic interests of the imperial power but instead, bankers and businessmen win the support of their countrymen by appealing to their idealism and patriotism. Yet, he believed that imperialism could be eliminated by social reforms while the capitalist system is maintained.

In his preface for *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin wrote that “capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the people of the world by a handful of “advanced” countries. And this “booty” is shared between two or three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth (America, Great Britain, and Japan) who are drawing the whole world into their war over the division of their booty” (1920, p. 3). This refers to the struggle between the “Great Powers” for hegemony of the world and control of its economic resources, actual and potential. Lenin perceived imperialism as being so

closely integrated with the structure and normal functioning of an advanced capitalism that he believed only the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, with the substitution of socialism, would rid the world of imperialism.

Max Weber had implicitly rejected the Marxist approach towards imperialism. He pointed out that the great powers had a natural tendency to expand in order to maintain and enhance their prestige and to maintain their place against each other. He thought that international trade in goods did not necessarily involve imperialism, but he did identify elements of what he called “imperialist capitalism” driving overseas expansion which were associated with direct state involvement and included armament contractors, loan-mongers and the interests of capitalists who organised labour on plantations. Weber believed that many features of this kind of imperialism had their origins in Roman times (Cain & Harrison, 2001).

Later in the twentieth century, ‘imperialism’ was commonly used to refer to the despotic methods of government and empire building, as well as to the policy of employing the power of the armed state to secure economic advantages in the world at large. It is a domination of man over man, country over country, man over threatening circumstances. The age of imperialistic expansion had more or less ended by World War II. Since then, almost all nations that were once colonies have become free and independent countries. But this is not to say that the resentment against industrialised, imperialist powers has completely ended. Nor has their influence over the countries they once ruled. Unfortunately, everyone is to some extent, a prisoner of the past.

In this respect, aspects of Japanese imperialism is studied in order to gain a better understanding on the impacts of the nation’s desire for wealth, power, and prestige. Japan’s imperial expansion, as exemplified in the animation films selected, was largely driven by economic motivation, as the commodities and bountiful resources in conquered territories were traded overseas, and the profit was then used to fund the nation’s war machine. After the Meiji Restoration led to massive industrialisation in Japan, the nation found itself in great need of natural resources. Industrialisation makes a nation dependent on iron, coal, and oil; none of which were found in great quantity on the Japanese archipelago. This led Japan to invade other countries in order to exploit the natural resources there. This notion was in line with Hobson’s idea of imperialism that patriotism, philanthropy, and the spirit of adventure advance the imperialist cause. It is also worth noting that Japanese imperialism is vital for its reputation and security in the Asian region, thus relates to Weber’s idea that imperialism is necessary to maintain and enhance the prestige of a great power and to maintain its place amongst other powers.

## WAR IN JAPAN’S ANIME

The atomic bomb had a powerful effect on the underlying themes of the Japanese anime world. Shapiro (as cited in Fuller, 2012) explained that the atomic-bomb related themes expressed in films after the war are important to help Japan cope with its loss, defeat, and despair while maintaining some resemblance of hope.

In the earliest attempt at confronting the A-bomb topic within the medium of animation, an animated 8-minute short film was created in 1978 by husband and wife team, Renzo and Sayoko Kinoshita, the pioneers of Hiroshima International Animation Festival. The film was titled *Pikadon*, or *Flash Boom* in English, which is an onomatopoeic word used by the Japanese to refer to the atomic bomb. The word is associated with what witnesses of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki saw and heard: first a blinding light, then a deafening explosion. The animation dispenses a

story with dialogue and simply depicts the blast and its effect on the population of Hiroshima. It was never released in the United States. In a letter to animation historian Karl Cohen, Sayoko Kinoshita reportedly wrote that the people of Hiroshima did not like the idea of *Pikadon* while it was in production (Cohen, 2003). It was only after the completion of film that people understood the effectiveness of animation. Today, the short film is only available via video-streaming websites and the quality of each version ranges from poor to atrocious with distorted audio, ruined colours and large chunks of missing footage.

Starting 1983, there have been several animated accounts of the horrific events of 1945, from the privations of civilians who were literally starving, to the U.S. military's firebombing of several cities, culminating in the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From 1988 to 1991, there was an annual summer movie, directed by Seiji Arihara and animated by Mushi Productions for release through the Nikkatsu theater chain as a Nikkatsu children's movie. The genre has slowed down ever since but has not completely died out. In addition, the city of Hiroshima hosts a biennial Hiroshima International Animation Festival in August. The festival, organised by the municipal government and the Hiroshima City Culture Foundation, was created in 1985 for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing. Films submitted from all over the world are screened at the festival and deal with the subject of war and peace, carrying the filmmakers and the city's hopes for a peaceful future.

Besides that, parents and educators in Japan have turned to anime to teach kids the meaning of "the bomb that ended World War II" to ordinary people. Each summer during school break, animation films such as *My Friend Iwata's Grandma: I Won't Go to War* (*Iwatakunchi no Obachan: Bokuwa Senso Senkenne*) are screened at children's recreation centres (Nakamaru, 2014). This particular film shows the humanitarian cost of the 1945 bombing in the final days of World War II, in which it depicts a grandmother in her youth losing her family to the bombing. The film carries a strong anti-war message, a striking feature in a work targeting small children. After hearing what his friend's grandmother experienced, the narrator at the end pledges never to go to war. Another film screened is *Kuro ga ita Natsu*, or *A Summer with Kuro*. The anime is about Kuro, a black kitten adopted by a girl and her younger brother living in wartime Hiroshima. The siblings and their parents manage to survive the atomic bombing and the ensuing fire, which destroyed most of the city's wooden buildings. But they are separated from Kuro. In the tragic finale, they find their beloved pet with heavy burns lying lifeless in an empty bomb shelter. These films act as a peace promoting tool and educate children about the importance of harmony.

Inevitably, Japan's long history of imperialism towards other nations eventually backfired. The atomic bombs dropped by the United States in 1945 resulted in high casualties thus leading the nation into defeat. The nationalism spirit ingrained in Japan's pre-war society shifted from blind nationalism towards the emperor and nation to favouring pacifist and nationalistic policies. The media culture of Japan, in particular anime, while often argued as merely a form of entertainment for children, proved effective in carrying heavy themes such as war. Evidently, filmmakers and animators have long conveyed their message of peace through their works, thus raising the awareness of harmony and unity amongst the audience.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: THE ANIMATION FILMS

Five Japanese war animation films were selected as follows: *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*), a 85-minute animation released on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1983; *Barefoot Gen 2* (*Hadashi no Gen 2*), a 86-minute animation released on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1986; *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*), a 89-minute animation released on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1988; *Girl in Summer Dresses* (*Natsufuku no Shoujo-tachi*), a 34-minute animation broadcasted on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1988, and *Kayoko's Diary – Who's Left Behind* (*Ushiro no Shomen Daare*), a 90-minute animation released on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1991. All the animations selected provide a common ground for understanding the impact of imperialism on Japan's society.

Japan, with a long history of imperialism since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, has since then determined to assert itself as a great nation that will not suffer domination by the West. Rapid industrialisation from Japan's imperialism successfully transformed the country into a modern military power. Starting from the Manchurian Incident in 1931, a series of historical events soon followed that culminated in Japan's entry into World War II. These events thus resulted in a deadly consequence to the nation as depicted in the animation films studied. Table 1 below, modified from Sugimoto's *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*, shows the sequence of key historical events related to the production of the selected animation films.

**Table 1.** Sequence of key historical events related to the selected animation films

Year	Month	Historical Events
1931	September	Outbreak of the Manchurian Incident and the start of Fifteen Year War
1933	March	Imperial Japan withdrew membership from the League of Nations
1937	July	Outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanking massacre
1938	April	National Mobilization Act promulgated (came into force in May)
1940	October	The Imperial Rule Assistance Association was established
1941	December	The attack on Pearl Harbour (outbreak of the Pacific War)
1942	February	The air raid on Darwin (Australia) by Japan
	April	The first air raid on Japan by the United States (Doolittle Air Raid)
	June	The Battle of Midway Island (Japan's lost exercise in WWII)
1945	March	The Great Tokyo Air Raid by the United States (motif of <i>Kayoko's Diary – Who's Left Behind</i> )
	May	Bombing of the Kawanishi aircraft factory by the United States
	June	Incendiary bombing of Kobe (motif of <i>Grave of the Fireflies</i> )
	August	Incendiary bombing of Hiroshima (motif of <i>Barefoot Gen</i> , <i>Barefoot Gen 2</i> , and <i>Girls in Summer Dresses</i> )
		Incendiary bombing of Nagasaki
		Emperor Hirohito announces surrender of Japan
		The end of the Pacific War
		The Occupation of Japan by the Allied Forces

Source: Modified from Sugimoto (2009)





**Figure 1.** The DVD cover of *Hadashi no Gen* (Madhouse Productions, 1983)

*Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*) is a film that depicts the immediate effect of the atomic bombing. It centres on a six-year-old boy named Gen who lives through the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and witnesses his family dying in the flaming rubble of their home. Directed by Mori Masaki and animated by Madhouse Productions, the film is loosely based on the autobiography of producer Keiji Nakazawa (1939–2012). Nakazawa was a cartoonist who lived through the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as a young boy and spent his life telling his wartime experiences through manga and animation.



**Figure 2.** The DVD cover of *Hadashi no Gen 2* (Madhouse Productions, 1986)

*Barefoot Gen 2* (*Hadashi no Gen 2*) is the continuation of Gen's story during the rebuilding of Hiroshima. The film focuses on the long-term problems faced by the survivors: the devastated economy and infrastructure, food shortage, unemployment, lack of housing, and the lingering effects of the atomic bomb's radioactive fallout including the impending death of Gen's mother from cancer. The film is directed by Toshio Hirata and animated by Madhouse Productions.



**Figure 3.** The theatrical poster of *Hotaru no Haka* (Studio Ghibli, 1988)

*Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*) recounts the plight of two siblings, 14-year-old Seita and four-year-old Setsuko towards the end of World War II. Post the 1945 firebombing raid on Kobe, the film depicts the events leading to the children's eventual deaths from malnutrition and starvation. The film closes with the spirits of Setsuko and Seita that are seen healthy, well-dressed and happy as they sit together on a bench, surrounded by fireflies and overlooking the modern, well-lit, prosperous city of Kobe. The film is the first feature film of Isao Takahata directed by Studio Ghibli. It is based on the novel of the same title by Akiyuki Nosaka.



**Figure 4.** The DVD cover of *Natsufuku no Shoujo-tachi* (Madhouse Productions, 1988)

*Girl in Summer Dresses* (*Natsufuku no Shoujo-tachi*) was broadcasted on the 43<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of Hiroshima's nuclear bomb blast in memory of "the girls who lost their lives to the atom bomb" (Clements & McCarthy, 2006, p. 237). The film focuses on diary entries of Yoko Moriwaki, a student at the oldest public school in Hiroshima who was drafted for war work with her classmates. An animated documentary in spirit, it also features live action footages of the bomb dropped, displays of burned clothes, damaged lunchboxes, and diaries of the students at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and interview clips of parents recalling their memories with their children. The film is directed by Toshio Hirata and Yoshiyuki Momose and animated by Madhouse Productions.



**Figure 5.** *Ushiro no Shomen Daare* poster (Mushi Productions, 1991)

*Kayoko's Diary – Who's Left Behind* (*Ushiro no Shomen Daare*) revolves around the life of a little girl, Kayoko Nakane. It first depicts the various “fun” patriotic efforts of Kayoko and the children around her age, and later showcases the deadly impact of the Great Tokyo air raid in their lives. The title of the film, *Who's Left Behind*, refers to a children's game played by the main character several times during the course of this film. The film is directed by Seiji Arihara and animated by Mushi Productions. The film is based on the autobiography of Kayoko Ebina and is narrated like a diary.

These animation films share in the collectivism of the Japanese memory as well as individual autobiographical accounts of personal suffering. Essentially family dramas seen through the eyes of children, the films attempt to speak for history through the vivid images of suffering and destruction. The horrors and hardships depicted in the films have become representative images of the war for the post-war generations. Despite the recurring tragedy theme, these films are interspersed with moments of resolution, effort and hope for the future.

In the mid-1930s, Japanese General and Minister of War, Sadao Araki declared that “it is Japan's mission to be supreme in Asia, the South Seas and eventually the four corners of the world” (Genser & Brignone, 2015, p. 15). However, Japan's conquest in pursuit of wealth and securing its position in the eye of the world, eventually backfired as exemplified in the animation films.

Although the animation films studied in this research may seem deceptively simple upon the first viewing, subsequent viewings reveal layer after layer of subversive political messages and imagery. The films serve as a strong criticism towards the war atrocities done by Imperial Japan. As portrayed in the films, it was the misdeeds done by Japan in the past that led to the firebombing of Hiroshima, Kobe and Tokyo. The bomb's destructive power was unprecedented, incinerating buildings and people. The main characters in the films, depicted at large, suffered tremendously in terms of physical and emotional from the devastation.

The animation films are silent or avoid the representation of Imperial Japan throughout the narratives. Instead, the films focus on the nuclear destruction and the victims in the aftermath to evade questions of responsibility. In this regard, the dominant ideology appears to be repressing Japan's responsibility for previous atrocities that led to the atomic bomb.

In all the films, the Japanese military are portrayed generally as filler scenes, showing the soldiers marching to war before the bombing, or soldiers sent to discard the numerous bodies throughout the ruined cities afterwards. For example in *Barefoot Gen*,

a soldier is seen dying from radiation poisoning. He is shivering from cold, losing his hair, and begins defecating and vomiting blood. As the effects of radiation on the human body are not well understood in 1945, the doctors at the Red Cross hospital have no cure and could not do anything to save the soldier with “strange symptoms” and “unknown sicknesses”. In *Grave of the Fireflies*, Seita carries a photo of his father in uniform as a captain in the Imperial Japanese Navy. To serve the country at the forefront was the honourable thing to do and this led to Seita’s admiration of his father. In *Kayoko’s Diary – Who’s Left Behind*, Kayoko is shocked to see a soldier on his bicycle shot by a low-flying P-51 Mustang. In an earlier scene, a letter from Kayoko’s uncle who serves as a military physician in China reads that “the vicious war seems to last forever” indicating that the Empire of Japan will not back down despite anything.

As little as the military is represented, the government is portrayed to an even lesser degree. The only portrayal of the government comes in the form of Emperor Hirohito’s 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945 radio broadcast in which he informs his people of Japan’s surrender. As the broadcast is played in *Barefoot Gen* and also in *Kayoko’s Diary – Who’s Left Behind*, the survivors of Hiroshima and Tokyo are shown kneeling sadly and shedding tears. The Emperor’s speech, coupled with the displayed images, are blatantly ironic. In the speech, the emperor urges, “I would like you to endure intolerable things, put up with unbearable things, and make peace come true for the future.” For example, in *Barefoot Gen*, during the broadcast, a naked child is shown weeping besides his topless deceased mother, followed by Gen unearthing the remains of this family, insinuating that the Japanese people had already endured intolerable and unbearable things. It should be noted that in reality, Hirohito’s surrender broadcast was a profound shock to the Japanese citizens. After years of being told about Japan’s inevitable victory, these beliefs were proven false in the space of a few minutes.

Interestingly, the animation films shifted the accountability for the suffering of the Japanese people on the home front from the misconduct of Imperial Japan to the United States which dropped the bomb and then occupied Japan. This can be attributed largely to the silence, or minimal representation of Japanese military and government compared to the imagery of the U.S. troops and its atrocities in the films. In *Barefoot Gen*, the main character is on his way to school and notices a B-29 aircraft flying far overhead. A short sequence further shows two American pilots speaking in military jargon to each other before eventually pushing the button that drops the bomb over Hiroshima. The blinding flash of white light horribly burns and melts away the skin of the citizens, and destroys buildings and architectures. The explosion scene lasts for 2 minutes 30 seconds and ends with a giant mushroom cloud looming over the city.

Following the catastrophic devastation, in *Barefoot Gen 2*, Gen and his stepbrother Ryuta come across some children chasing after U.S. troops in a jeep, shouting “hey, give us some chocolate!” This prompts the young Ryuta to join in the chase, much to Gen’s dismay, “stupid, how I could kiss the arses of the Yankees who dropped *Pika* (atomic bomb)?” In another scene, U.S. soldiers are shown using bulldozers for a mass burial of the remains of Hiroshima’s victims. The locals regard this as cruel and insensitive as they believe this will keep the victims from reaching their final resting place. The children throw stones at the soldiers in protest but manage to run away after being chased.

*Grave of the Fireflies* shows a fleet of several hundred U.S. B-29 Superfortress bombers flying overhead and dropping thousands of incendiary bomblets, which start huge fires that quickly destroy Kobe. Meanwhile, *Girls in Summer Dresses* portrays the bomb through an innocent exchange between the students as they see something shiny and that “looks pretty” falling from the sky. None of the students survive the nuclear

blast as they were only 300 metres away from the epicentre. The film ends with photographs of the students who died in the bombing and some clips of burned clothes, damaged lunchboxes, and diaries of the students. While this particular scene does not explicitly and directly show the conduct of the U.S. troops, it however indeed draws the conclusion that the party to be blamed is indeed the U.S. forces.

In *Kayoko's Diary – Who's Left Behind*, Kayoko is seen narrowly escaping from being shot by a low-flying P-51 Mustang. This prompts anger amongst audience, as targeting civilians or non-combatants especially innocent children is an unethical practice in war. Soon afterwards, the fearful Kayoko retreats into the forest for cover as a fleet of U.S. B-29 Superfortress bombers fly overhead. She sees the distant lights of Tokyo from the hilltop and mourns the fate of her family, as the city glows with the fires of bombing. This evokes the sympathy of the audience, as the young girl is shown rendered helpless of the situation.

The only anti-imperialism notion is glimpsed in the film *Barefoot Gen*. The film presents an explicitly political scene of resistance towards the imperialist Japan. Gen's father, Daikichi heatedly criticises the conduct of the war and imperialist war efforts as he believes that their involvement in the war is due to the greed of the rich ruling class. When Gen asks the reason Japan keeps fighting the war even though they are clearly losing, Daikichi tells him that the government is run by "madmen" and points out that "Sometimes it takes a lot more courage not to fight than to fight". He rejects the military propaganda and doesn't mind being perceived as a traitor or coward for resisting the whole idea of war. Although it seems unlikely that such sentiments would have been expressed publicly during the war period, the father's words help to portray a critical outlook towards the military involvement that led to the bombing while demonstrating unwillingness to be punished by higher authorities. Despite his status as only a day labourer who wears a simple undershirt, it is his influence and spirit that inspires and sustains Gen throughout the film.

The films studied in this paper vividly portray child protagonists as passive and pitiful victims of chance, and ingrains in the public mind, the horrors and tragedies of war experienced by civilians. The surreal horror scenes of the bombings and its ghastly aftermath reinforce the imagery of powerless victims terrorised from the sky. Indeed, these animation films present the imperialism of Japan by heavily portraying the atrocities of war experienced on the home front by innocent civilians. By focusing on the hardships of the common people at times of war, the films have adopted the silent treatment of the war aggressor. Undoubtedly, these animations have criticised and condemned Japanese imperialism through the portrayal of civilians' deaths, diseases, starvation, and homelessness. However, it can also be argued that this silence, or minimal representation of Japanese military and government only serves to draw away any attention to the brutal nature of Japanese imperialism that may have led the nation to war.

## CONCLUSION

This article explored the new understanding of the atomic bomb and firebombing that ended the Pacific War, as well as the horrifying aftermath through animation films featuring the images of such atrocities. The five animation films studied in this article serve as a condemnation of the Japanese imperialism, an obvious front for glory that led to the wholesale slaughter of civilians on the home islands. The citizens suffered tremendously from allied bombardment at an unprecedented scale, as epitomised in the animation films. While the imperialism theme that emerged from the analyses is clearly visible in a number of films and not in others, in general, all the animation films touched on one common notion: war and its deadly impact of conquest. Clearly, these films are a sobering reminder and powerful instrument of the damnation of war in all of its forms and serve as a peace education tool not only for Japan, but also for the whole world.

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